Companies bet carbon labels can help

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FULL TEXT

The world is littered with labels -markers that tell you how many calories are in a candy bar or if a tomato is organic. Now, companies are creating labels to show consumers the environmental costs of their daily habits. Carbon labels have already cropped up salads, sneakers and even face creams. Unilever, the maker of Dove soap and Lipton teas, has said it will add labels to all of its 70,000 products.

"We think of carbon as the new calorie," said Prakash Arunkundrum, head of global operations and sustainability at Logitech, the technology accessories manufacturer, which recently rolled out carbon labels on several products including a gaming mouse and keyboard.

"We want carbon to be that thing that you look at and you say, 'OK, am I going to really need this in my life today?'"The labels estimate a product's environmental impact from cradle to grave as a carbon equivalent reflecting the greenhouse gas emissions or CO2e spent in its creation, transportation, use and end of life, as measured in grams or kilograms of carbon.

Logitech estimates that its wireless gaming mouse, for example, generates 7.84 kg of carbon emissions throughout its estimated two-year use period. By comparison, manufacturing a new Ford Focus Titanium costs about 8,000 kg CO2e, according to Mike Berners-Lee, Companies are creating carbon labels to show consumers the environmental costs of their daily habits. PHOTO: CARLA GOTTGENS/BLOOMBERG a professor at Lancaster University and expert in carbon footprinting.

But some environmentalists are skeptical of the corporate push toward consumer labels. Calculating the carbon footprint of any given product is painstakingly complicated work. Reliable data about carbon emissions consumed in the manufacturing process is scarce, for example, leaving companies to establish their own methodologies. Carbon labels also are not regulated and require consumers to translate relatively complex scientific terms like "carbon equivalents" on the fly.

Experts are also concerned that the rush to carbon labeling could become too heavy on marketing and light on substance. "We don't want you just slapping a label onto your product," said Christine Rosen, associate professor of business and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. That could create "huge amounts of consumer cynicism."

But industry officials say their efforts reflect consumer demand. "Consumers are increasingly engaged on this... as a proxy, they're looking for companies to show that they are aware of climate change and sustainability and they're taking action on it," said Tom Delay, chief executive of Carbon Trust, which helps companies measure their carbon footprint. Such eco-labeling is not an entirely new phenomenon. In 2007, Delay helped PepsiCo roll out a carbon label for its popular Walkers Crisps. The chips, he said, weighed just 34.5 grams by mass but came with a 75-gram carbon price tag, including the emissions required to grow the potatoes, then dehydrate, deepfry, and package the snack. "When it was launched, a journalist had a packet of crisps and they said, 'I kind of don't get it,'" Delay recalled. Recently interest in carbon labeling has skyrocketed. Oatly AB, the Swedish milk alternative; Quorn, the meat substitute; and restaurant chain Just Salad have introduced carbon labels, touting transparency as the first step toward tackling climate change.

"We are doing more footprinting, more labeling across sectors than we've done before," said Delay. "It's as if there's a point of inflection." Allbirds, the San Francisco-based shoe brand, began including carbon labels on all its products in April 2020 - the first was stitched into the sole of its Dasher running shoe. The Dasher costs the planet 9 kg of carbon emissions -a number that includes the life cycle of the shoe, including the extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, use and its disposal.

"In creating the carbon label, we synthesize the crux of what is challenging our species from an environmental perspective into a single number," said Joey Zwillinger, the company's co-founder.

The company developed a tool with a third party in 2018 to measure its carbon footprint -tracking everything from the methane generated by sheep burps in New Zealand where the company sources its merino wool to the air conditioning whirring in its factories.

Earlier this year, it made the proprietary methodology public, imploring the fashion industry, which accounts for about 10% of global emissions, to be more transparent. "The goal of our initiative is to create a race to zero [emissions] -or better," said Zwillinger. The company recently partnered with Adidas to make what it claims is the lowest carbon running shoe ever -clocking in at under 3 kg carbon emissions. The shoe, not yet on shelves, will be widely released next spring. Last year, Priscilla Tsai, founder of the beauty brand, Cocokind, began working with a third party to calculate the carbon emissions of her products. The carbon footprint of Cocokind's Rosewater Toner -24.5 grams CO2e -is now displayed like a nutrition label on its packaging. Its Chia Facial Oil generates 2.7 grams of carbon emissions. The process was cumbersome and expensive, said Tsai, but the labels have been well received by customers and prompted her to reconsider where the company sources some of its ingredients. Still, Tsai says she worries some customers may be confused by the labels. "Most consumers don't know how to read a carbon label yet," she said. "We are putting out the education and we're asking consumers to learn with us."

Compounding the problem, experts say, is the lack of federal guidelines for carbon labels.

"Confusion is the enemy of action," said Paula DiPerna, an adviser to CDP, a nonprofit that works with companies to disclose their environmental impacts. "As a consumer, you're kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place in the sense that either you're overwhelmed with technical data or it's a confusing situation."

There are voluntary international standards for estimating a product's carbon footprint. But neither the Environmental Protection Agency or the Federal Trade Commission have programs to regulate or standardize carbon labels.

"The Federal Trade Commission does not have any specific carbon labeling requirements," said Hampton Newsome, an attorney in the agency's Bureau of Consumer Protection. But, he said, the FTC issues Green Guides to help marketers avoid making environmental marketing claims that are unfair or deceptive.

Panera Bread has taken a different approach to sharing the carbon footprint of its food. The chain began tracking its carbon footprint in 2015, but was struggling to make these complex calculations digestible for customers, said Sara Burnett, Panera's vice president of food values, sustainability and public relations. "We just kept asking ourselves a question like, how do I take this really complicated topic of climate change and literally bring it down to the plate level?" Panera partnered with the World Resources Institute, a global research group, to create a carbon label identifying which meals fall below a threshold of 5.38 kg of carbon emissions per lunch or dinner -a number that the WRI says is needed to cut food-related emissions 25% by 2030, in line with the goals of the Paris climate agreement. If the item falls below that threshold, it is labeled a "Cool Food Meal" with a grinning green emoji.

"It's not your usual kind of eco-label," said Daniel Vennard, program director at WRI. "A smiling emoji -and especially a green smiling emoji... has been found to prompt people to make healthier choices."

Most Cool Food Meals lack meat, and meat production is a major cause of climate change, scientists say. "Eating a plant-based diet is 100% the best thing you can do for the climate," said Burnett. But this doesn't mean consumers need to forgo Panera's steak sandwiches entirely, she said.

Ultimately, Burnett said, labels will empower consumers to measure carbon like calories. If she indulges during one meal, she said, she'll make healthier choices with the next. "We have to continue to think that about carbon as well."

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